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MELTZER: ROCK IS DEAD

By KRISTINE McKENNA

"I used to get up in the morning and play records all day long and take notes," recalls Richard Meltzer, whose 1970 book "The Aesthetics of Rock" was one of the first attempts to dissect rock 'n' roll using traditional analytic modes.

"I discovered things all the time—relationships between songs, hidden meanings, all kinds of stuff—and I really felt that I was inside the music. Re-reading the book as I recently did, I was struck by how claustrophobic that must've been, living between the headphones for four years as I did. But I found plenty of room to breathe in the sonic universe."

Recently reissued by Da Capo Press, "The Aesthetics of Rock" is as much a eulogy for the lost innocence of the Love Generation as it is a formal treatise on music. Begun in 1965 when Meltzer was studying philosophy at Stony Brook University in New York, the book covers the years 1956-68 and is described by Meltzer as "a document of the '60s and the last time the music was unconditionally good."

The book is a few other things as well. A typical sentence might draw a parallel between Nietzsche, Dr. Seuss, the Shangri-Las and Plato. Riddled with arcane references, it's fairly weighty stuff, and Meltzer's broad frame of reference and his irreverent writing style made a solid case for the then unheard-of notion of rock criticism as a legitimate literary form. The author (who appears next Sunday for a book-signing at George Sand Books in Hollywood) is aware that he has a lot to answer for.

MICHAEL EDWARDS / Los Angeles Times

Author Meltzer: "Music has become capitalist dog food."

"As far as a literary form, rock criticism has never amounted to anything," concludes Meltzer, 42. "There are a few good people who've rejected the food tube of the music industry, but almost 100% of the writers have plugged into the food tube, and there isn't a single rock writer who couldn't easily be replaced by another 50."

Lest one assume that Meltzer has been reaping the benefits of this tainted profession for the past 20 years, let it be known that he bailed out early on, and spent the past decade writing about food, architecture, boxing, old girlfriends—anything but rock music.

Meltzer's distaste for rock criticism is no doubt largely attributable to the fact that as far as he's concerned, "the music was over in 1968. The first three or four albums by people like Dylan, the Beatles, the Stones—there were entire continents of undiscovered turf in those records.

"Those artists discovered the turf, then they strip-mined it, and by the time 'Sgt. Pepper's' came out, they'd pretty much exhausted it.

"Originally rock 'n' roll was about liberation and was very anti-fashion," he continues. "Then with the ascendancy of people like Elton John and Bowie in the '70s, the message became, 'Let's bring back conformity and pretend that it's a certain kind of dance.'

"Music has become capitalist dog food and though there might be decent cuts once in a while, there are no decent trends. There used to be elements of accident and risk in live rock shows—in fact, those were the primary characteristics—but now they all turn in polished performances."

Surely the human failings that corrupt rock music today existed in the '60s. Did people simply have more integrity then? If so, what changed them?

"Everything changed when the record industry realized the vast sum of money there was to be made and that they could own it all," says Meltzer. "Now they do, and I can't see that changing. They know how to perpetuate the germ plasma of this garbage. It amazes me that the Washington Wives are so up in arms about rock lyrics because rock is so much the friend of those people. It's a great source of stability for this country. It keeps people in line while masquerading as a vehicle of freedom.

"I recently went to a party of people in their 20s and everybody sat around with beers watching videos," he recalls, visibly saddened by the thought. "It really depressed me, so I went home and stayed up all night listening to the records I wrote about in this book. I sat there crying because I couldn't help feeling that a light had gone out in the world.

"It seems that in the '60s—and largely because of this music—there really was some concrete achievement by the human race. And you can forget flower power and peace marches—the music was the flame that really burned high.

"And some of the very people who played an instrumental role in what was achieved—the Dylans and whatnot—have betrayed what they did. They're all just entertainers now. Like movies and TV, rock 'n' roll is just another form of meticulously choreographed insincerity." □

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